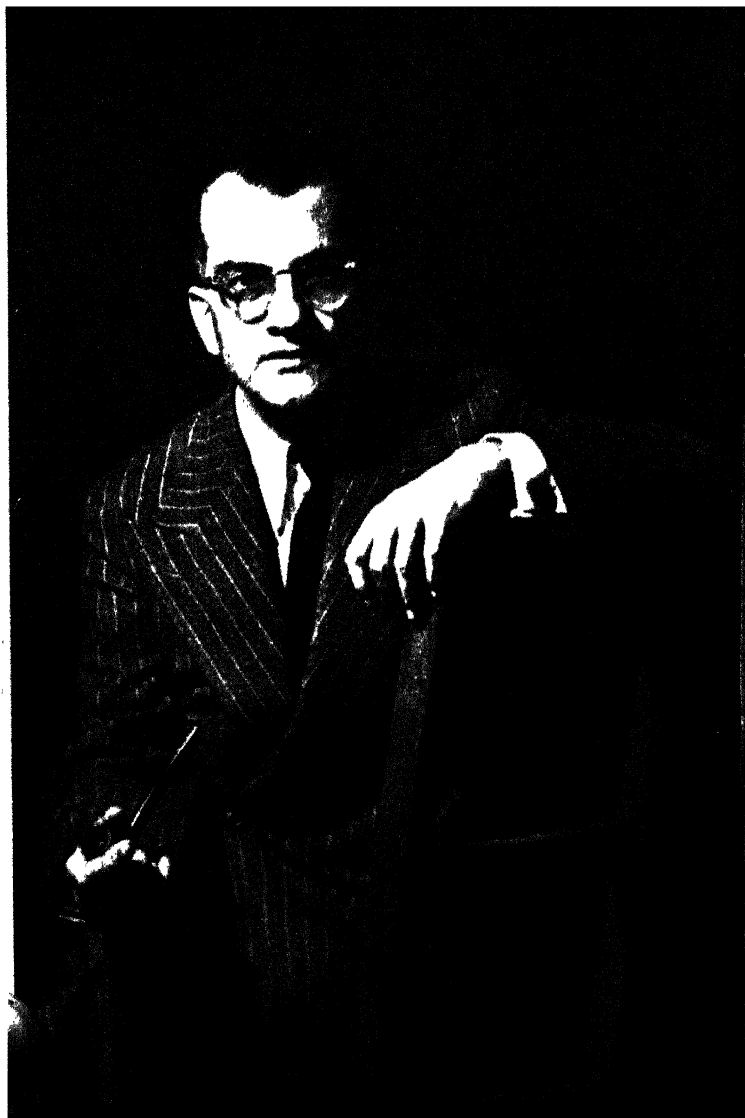


JPEES FIVE

THE LIGHT ABOVE THE CLOUDS



ADI K. SETT

THE

LIGHT ABOVE THE CLOUDS

Thirty-Nine Poems

WITH A FOREWORD

By

VERRIER ELWIN

*"drowsy wings dream of a voyage
to the light above the clouds."*

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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TO
MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER,
FOR THEIR CONFIDENCE, THEIR
PATIENCE AND THEIR TRUST
IN ME.

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FOREWORD

THE history of Indo-Anglian poetry, which is now a little over a hundred years old, has been divided into three stages: in the first it was Imitative, in the second it was Indianized, in the third it has become Individual. Typical of the first stage were such works as the tedious *The Shair* by Kashiprosād Ghose which was influenced by Scott, *The Captive Lady* by Michael Dutt which was influenced by Byron and the beautiful, though often derivative, work of Toru Dutt. In the second period Rabindranath Tagore wrote poetry which had the outward form of English but which had an essentially Indian heart. Sarojini Naidu's poetry also owes little to external influence and is wholly Indian in spirit. Among the Individualists I would place Sahid Suhrawardy and Bharati Sarabhai, for although the latter's *The Well of the People* has an Indian theme it is essentially the expression of a personal mood.

So also, while it would have been impossible for *The Light Above the Clouds* to have sprung from any but Indian soil, Mr. Adi Sett is one of the modern Individual writers. His work is marked by an unusual sensitivity, and a great

tenderness for human life. This writer knows the 'heartbreaks, failures, frustrations,' 'the still-born ambitions, disappointments' that mark in some degree the life of every man ; but unlike most of us he does not run away from his failures, but faces them and turns them into the stuff of poetry.

And it is not only his own failure that oppresses him ; there is the overwhelmingly tragic failure of impermanence. Mr. Sett cannot forget the transitoriness of things ; the 'jealous hand' of 'Time touches all he has ; he begs his love to tarry awhile before her face is lost in dreams. This feeling gains touching expression in the poem 'Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old ?'

Mr. Sett has a tremulous and responsive heart, and his love poetry is much better than his poems on war or religion. To my mind the best thing he has done is the lovely short poem—'Until I saw you my life was a song.' He is full of memories which carry him on drowsy wings of dream to the light above the clouds.

What can I take of you

But that fair, flower-like face

For my dreams ?

Some memories are so exquisite that he dare not recall them.

Those eyes I dare not see, nor that face
In my dreams.

But Mr. Sett must not be supposed a mere dreamer in an ivory tower. He is capable of strong and vibrant realism, whether in love as in 'Ultimum' or in his imaginative understanding of war. His work is indeed a remarkable blending of the actual and the ideal.

I have 'known' Mr. Sett and have been happy in his friendship for many years, but I did not really *know* him until I opened the proofs of this little book. Many other friends will welcome this essay in self-realization, this evidence that—in the words of C. Day Lewis,

Never was cup so mortal but poets with mild
Everlastings have crowned it.

Verner E. Turin

MANJALIKA

This hour I love the best, this hour of cold,
steel-grey dawn
When, slowly, life quivers into consciousness
and an ecstasy divine,
When, quietly, men turn their thoughts to Thee
And begin their daily life with a hymn of
praise to Thee.

This hour I love the best, this hour of cold,
steel-grey dawn
 When night turns and wakes from her sleep
 And day dawns anew for us
 When I seem to clasp Thy hand, to touch
Thy Holy feet,
 Oh, Thou Immaculate Spirit, to see Thy very face.

This hour I love the best, this hour of cold,
steel-grey dawn
 When I realise that nothing moves nor fades
nor dies without Thy slightest command
 That not even a little leaf from a tree falls
without Thy knowledge,
 And then, the Spirit moves
 And the dawn deepens into a golden, opal day.

No light shines on me, dear God, save the
 radiance of Your divine glow.
There is no love or sympathy for me save the
compassionate mercy which flows from Your heart!
And when I am lonely in my darkest hour
 of grief

To You alone I look for relief.
It is then that I feel Your presence the most
It is then that I feel Your touch, that I see
Your Immaculate Form.
You are my only Friend, my only Guide,
my only Light.
It is to You alone, Oh God, that I turn
to calm this storm and stress of life
And to give a little respite, even though it be a
dim quivering hope
For the hour that is to come, the morrow
that is to dawn.

WHY, like Winter's bleak and chill gloom
Should sorrow have been traced on my brow ?
Do I see nothing but a ghastly, distant doom
For me and slough ?
And yet, I know that this fog must lift

And a gleam be seen
By me, Oh God, Thy gift,
The approach of calm from this bog.
This sorrow which clings so tightly to me
Must pass as does all despair, in cycles
Of seasons. Winter must fade into Spring
With its riot of colours, dawning dreams and
the magic of ecstatic sounds.

I know that my grief will go
When the earth trembles with burning flowers
When the air echoes with song birds
And trees with perfumed blossoms tower
And joy throbs in the hearts of men.
I know, I know that this despair will go
With the hot passion of a man for his mate
When Time slowly drifts by
And the Seasons change—from Winter to joyous
Spring and coloured Autumn and
Once again the shiver of Winter's gloam
When the rose will not be so red nor the
grass so jade.

4

CAN You not hear me, God ?
Can You not hear my prayer, my cry ?
Then why must this tumult fall to me ?

This anguish and pain and sorrow ?
Why must my body, my mind be a wreck
Tortured with doubts and fears ?
Should only tears
Fall to my share ?
I want not riches nor worldly gains nor fame
Nor that transient glitter in whose name
Men slaughter each other
With thirsting-evil-greed, destroying all
Your beauty
Till nothing is left but the darkest shame.
Let Your magic breath on me touch
That I may get that great calm for which
I restlessly strive
And in my empty hands let fall
Your divine grace, this above all
Which is Your holy love so that my soul
Be complete with cool contentment.

5

LEAVE me alone in my sorrow, leave me alone
in my despair
In a darkened room so that I may brood
O'er those I have sought and those who've died,
And those whom I loved and lost.
Men come and go, telling me my melancholy
will pass

On memory's hazy face ?
Should the song of a thrush, man or maiden
Cease of a sudden ?
Should the intense sunrise and sunset's
 colour-clots
Change and fade as each hour upon hour is born?
Should leafless Autumn be round the corner
And Winter approach us with her dreaded
 white mantle ?
Should fresh and fiery youth give place
To mouldy age as it eats flesh upon flesh
Till nothing remains but a streak, a shadow ?
Why should the snows melt and running
 waters die
Why should beautiful dreams fly
Why should we be in a space of utter blankness
And brilliant light be purple darkness ?
O Invisible Spirit, why should Beauty drift
Along Time's ageless tornado
Into futility, mere eternity ?
Should nothing remain permanent
A face, a voice, a song, a flower
That which we value and love ?
Must Your jealous hand touch all
And must all this Beauty perish
And be just dust and ashes ?

REST, O my tremulous heart, rest, rest.
Why this fear ? Why this tremor ?
If today be dark, surely a light will quiver
Tomorrow. If there be sorrow, surely mirth
must follow.
If there be death, surely birth must come
If not today, then tomorrow.
The flowers that wilt today
Will again scintillate in their perfumed glory,
So why this fear ? Why this tremor ?
Rest, O my tremulous heart, rest, rest.

UNTIL I saw you my life was a song
For I knew not what was wrong.
I lived in peace serene and tranquil calm
Until I saw you my life was a song.
I lived with coloured fancies and phantoms
That flitted in my vision-like life
Until I saw you.
Until I saw your beauteous form
And the sheen on your long black tresses
The ecstasy that stirred in your eyes
The voice that spoke only of love

TARRY awhile, O tarry awhile
 So that I may see your face just a moment more
 Enshrined in the rose of memory,
 That I may dream and dream of this
night and you.

Mingle your vision in the violet night
 And if even then Time should thunder with
ceaseless fury

And lands and oceans divide you and me
 I will dream and dream only of the beauty
 Of your marble moon-face.

WHEN you clasped your hand in mine
 And your glittering eyes pierced my heart,
 When you said we'd meet again and yet again
 And even fixed the rendezvous,
 And when in the street I turned and saw you
 Leaning out of the window, your lips quivering,
 Dancing mischief in your eyes, and a wave
of your hand—
 I did not then know that it would be goodbye
 That I'd never see you again
 That you'd just be a fading star

“ Even in my clayey coffin and so I’ve come
back to you.”
Shall I see that alabaster face, those
dreaming eyes,
Shall I see that swaying form, hear that
murmurous voice,
For all that beauty I have suffered so !
No, awake or dreaming, I dare not see
Her thinnest shadow
For she has gone like splintered glass.

13

THIS day, too, shall pass, this day of sorrow.
Perhaps a new desire, a hope, a melody may
be born in my heart tomorrow.
Perhaps the clouds may not be so dark,
the sea not so black.
The dead dreams of today may be the silver
gleams of hope tomorrow.
Perhaps I may see the flowers in the fields
burning more fiercely
In the blue, blue glow of the day.
Perhaps I may hear the songs of birds a-quiver
In sheer ecstasy. Perhaps I may even catch
a distant glimpse of you
Bejewelled and brilliant like a bride.
Yes, this day, too, shall pass, this day of sorrow.

Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old?
 Will those shining eyes go dull and blind
 With the relentless surge of Time ?
 Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old?
 Will you wither like a blossom in Winter's blight?
 Will you be ugly, toothless, deaf ?
 Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old?
 Will you shrink from the rest of the world ?
 Will you see no friends, sink within yourself?
 Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old?
 Will that rippling laughter be just a sigh ?
 Will the music of your voice falter and die ?
 Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old?
 Will the warm rhapsody of your flower-like body
 Snap into cold, lifeless marble of a tomb ?
 Will those beauteous black hair
 Change into threads, wispy and white ?
 Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old?
 Will you be hideous, wicked, jealous
 Of maidens, thirteen Springs old ?
 Will you dream dreams, dark and ominous?
 Will you await the ultimate silently, patiently?
 Or will you be bitter with strife, envious of
 others' beauty and warmth of youth?

Will the song of your life suddenly quiver and end?
And will this beautiful being be just silent
and dead?
Will you grow old, O my love, will you grow old?

15

Oft have I wondered had it not been better had
we not met ? Had I not seen your regal beauty?
Had I not loved you ?

Oft have I wondered had it not been better had
you not flashed those ravishing eyes at me, not
murmured like a whisper in the wind, not
laughed, jested of this and that?

Oft have I wondered had it not been better if we
had not sat side by side and eaten of the food
of life ?

Oft have I wondered had it not been better had
you not seen me at all?
Had you not vanished like a shadowless spectre?
Had you not caused this havoc in my heart—
this anguish, this pain, this sorrow ?

And yet oft have I wondered whether to have
loved you even for a shivering second has not
been worth all this desolation, this sorrow !

LONG years have I waited for your love
Long years and years
Till my flaming dreams have turned to an
 asthenic memory
Till my heart has been heavy and weary.
“ Wait,” you have said, “ Wait,
“ The day will come when I’ll give you the
 love within me
“ The ecstasy, the joy, the spark
“ The fire which burns in me for you.”
But a terrible fear grips me tight in its tentacles :
If you should not give me your love soon,
 very soon,
And if I should see a dream-face of fragile beauty
As a limpid drop of dew,
What will then become of you ?
And all these long years that I have waited
 and waited in vain for you ?

Does she not know
That her beauty must go
With a moan and a sigh
As Time touches her with its scars ?

Does she not know
That her beauty must go
Her moon face
Her gazelle eyes
That spray of golden hair
Like dawn-light
Must all rot and perish and go
As the fragrance of a flower
That dies and leaves behind
But a tinge of faint remembrance ?
Does she not know
That she must crumble with age
That her step must lag
That her voice must quaver
That her back be bent
That she must totter and fall
As inevitable age must wither us all ?
And yet, now, proud as a queen,
Regal in mien,
She holds sway with the spell of her beauty.
Again and again, in tinted costumes,
Jewels a-glitter, she asks herself :
“ Am I not beautiful ? ”
“ Am I not fit for the love of a prince ? ”
Again and again, in attire newer and newer
Shining with gems, she looks at the mirror
And sees there that face like a golden moon,
Those eyes, that hair like ripe corn :

“ Am I not lovely ? Who could be
lovelier than I ? ”

But she forgets that Time creeps by
Silently, slowly, yet surely
And that with each fatal footfall
Her death-knell is rung
And Age, unknown to her,
Seals her doom.

“ Who could be lovelier than I ? ”

Yet, will she say that
Years and years hence,
Forgotten, forlorn, alone,
When she is but a white shadow ?
Will she then dare look into a mirror
And flaunt her beauty
Like burnished gold at the World ?
Will she then dare look upon a man and say :
“ I am as lovely as a sun-kissed, radiant day ? ”

18

Must you chant your prayers within these four
walls and a roof
Into the void ?

Must you sit deep in méditation before your
clay god, decorated with flowers and
bedecked with tinsel ?

Must you ply him with behests and lay upon
him cover upon cover of your prayer, as you
pass from one bead to another of your rosary ?

Are you the only one, O foolish heart, that
He cares for, cherishes, loves, looks after ?
Are you His only creation ?

Think this, O foolish heart, that nothing escapes
His attention—not one little stir, not one
little sigh or whisper, not one little care
or sorrow.

Then why must you chant your prayers within
these four walls and a roof
Into the void ?

Do you not see Him in the blue of the sky
In the wide open spaces,
In the tips of ripe gold corn, swaying in
the breeze ?

Do you not see Him in brooks that run,
waters that fall ?

Do you not see His Face etched in blossoms,
Hear His voice in the trembling songs of birds,
In the delicate whisper of the winds ?

Do you not hear His steps in the deadly
silence of the night as He comes to us with
His divine peace, with His holy touch ?

Then, why must you chant your prayers
within these four walls and a roof
Into the void ?

WAR POEMS
:
FROM THE DEEP SILENCE

ELEVENTH NOVEMBER

THEY shall not rise again
And see the deep, deathless beauty of life
and earth ;
Neither hear the singing strings nor the fluted
melodies from Orpheus's throat
For they lie undisturbed in the dank abyss,
Unawakened and exhausted in the holocaust
of an epic strife.
Before them a generation strove and died
For the same cause. Today we kneel and pray
In their memory for they shall never be with
us again
Nor see the burning flowers in the fields,
The tinted skies at morn,
Or the carmine of the sun as it dips in the horizon
At evensong.
As we in silence bend our heads
Remembering those who've gone before us :
Let us beseech Mars that we may not hear his
clarion
So that, in calm, we may build a Citadel
From the broken pieces of this World
With stone and steel.
They have passed before us and nevermore
Will they see the deep, deathless beauty of
this earth.

NONE LONELIER THAN SHE

"MUM," said he, as he clung round her neck
And lip to lip they said farewell.

"Mum, I'll soon be back.

"Now, no tears. This ain't the first time.

"So thumbs up and cheers !

"Look after yourself. I'll soon be back

"After hammering the Huns.

"You'll look after Maggie, won't you, Mother ?

"She'll be lonesome without me."

She looked at his smooth, radiant face

So full of energy and health, so clean,

so young, so beautiful.

"God be with you, Son," said she, "Take

good care of you."

And stifled a sob, dried her tears.

And he went, full of confidence and joy

Sure to return to his home, his mother,

his country,

Three hours later, while floating in the skies

The 'plane crashed and was a heap of cinders.

The Mother waited as she always did

With silent patience, ready with the

things he would want

Cocoa and eggs, bread, butter, jam.

Day waned into night and night was day again

Yet, the Mother sat in her arm-chair
Knitting, waiting for her boy to return,
praying, hoping, yet fearing
Terrifying, unknown fears.

The dreaded news came to her when she was
all alone
Musing, praying, waiting waiting for her boy
to return.

"We very much regret to announce..." it began.
She was like stone, the paper fell from her hand.
And she sat as the white moonlight
When the stars are dead and dying.

"It cannot be, surely he's not dead," said she
To herself. "It cannot be! Why, he was
right here

"Just a little time ago, full of beans.

"Surely God would not take him from me—

"My only child, my only joy, my only hope.

"No, he's not dead. It can't be!

"There must be some mistake."

And then, quietly, tottered across the street
To show the letter to Maggie.

The two women were one in sorrow—

They wept for their John who'd never return.

Maggie knew that but the Mother, mad with hope,
Said he'd come. "Mum, I'll soon be home,"

he had said.

She never mentioned his name

But did her daily job without a sob
Sometimes walking on tip-toe
Like a frightened, hunted beast
With always the hope in her heart, the
dream in her eyes

That John would soon be home.
At times, with a queer smile slit across her lips
She'd go to his room, just as he had left it,
Pat the bed, smoothen the pillows, caress his suits
Look at his things
Photos of Maggie and herself
And cry out : " It's not true. He's not dead.
" He'll soon be back. It must be a mistake.
" God can't take my only child.
" Why, he was here a while back."
And whenever she hears the drone of a 'plane
By day or by night,
Breathlessly she runs to her small garden
Her heart thumping hard.
Her head thrown back, hands shading her eyes,
She scans the skies
For John's 'plane,
As she so firmly believes that he will return,
he will return, he will return.
And when complacent people go to dole their
parrot sympathies
She says the same :

“ He’ll come back soon. Maggie and I are
waiting for him,”

And tosses her head across the way to indicate
The home of the girl her John loved.

And in the street, these people tap their heads
And say : “ Poor soul ! She’s balmy in the
crumpet.

“ Why, the boy is as dead as a stone

“ And yet she insists he’ll return home.

“ Poor soul,” and they just trot away

To condole with some other broken, torn heart,

While the Mother silently patters about

Consoling herself : “ He’s not dead

“ It can’t be. Why, he said, ‘ Mum, I’ll soon
be back.’ ”

TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER

COLOUR, caste, creed nor class
Do we know.
Neither from where you hail
Nor who mourns your loss
With brave grief. But this we know,
O unknown soldier,
That you fought and fought hard
And saved a crashing avalanche from falling
upon us.
You fought and fought
In arid deserts, in snowy blasts, in depthless
jungles,
In unknown spots, at unknown moments,
in unknown ways.
But you fought a relentless enemy and fighting
Lost a life dear to your kith, to your kin.
And when your body broke in an unknown
land, you fell
With upturned face to the speechless stars,
Lips wreathed in a wistful smile.
From the empty palms of your hands
Grenades did not fall but a message
Which most of us cannot yet understand

Amidst dying men and paralysed machines.
Unknown soldier, we shall honour you,
respect you, love you.
Hear our fervent prayer and build a firm
Future on a
Tottering Past
For, surely, we'll understand your message
one day
And realise our wanton mistake.

THEY SHALL NOT DIE

THEY shall not die
Though they have gone into blank space
And black despair has struck at every door.
They shall not die
Though in their dreamless sleep they lie
Far and near, battered, maimed.
Full of hope and fortitude they went
With a smile on their lips and a song in their hearts
Yet never to return, but to die unknown
In strange lands.
For one such she mourns in silent grief.
That radiant smile, that youthful song
That footfall which will not be heard.
Just a single joy stirs in her heart. . .
He died for the Country.
Oh, God, hear our orectic prayer :
Let this hour be swift
And the Dawn near.
Give us the strength to build the Future
On the anguish, the blood, the toil, the tears
Of those who are but memories.
They shall not die
Though they have gone into blank space,
They shall not die.

•

STRAY POEMS

THE EBB AND THE FLOW

•

“WHAT WILL YOU BRING FROM
THE FAIR ? ”

“WHAT will you bring from the Fair for me ? , ”
said she,

As she watched him dress in tunic and turban

“What will you bring for me ? ”

“I’ll bring you an emerald as green as the
rain-washed hills

“In weight like a stone—the ransom of a king,

“Square in shape and green, green like the sea.”

She laughed at this fantasy.

“But we’ve no money—just enough for
one meal a day.

“We patch and we pinch till our very life
seems to drain away.

“We’ve no money,” said she.

“I’ll get you a ruby—red as the blood of a
prince

“Or diamonds that will glint in the night.”

But she just laughed and shook her head,

“We’ve no money.”

Yet, woman-like, she persisted : “What will
you get from the Fair for me ? ”

With dancing mischief in his eyes he asked,

“Shall it be a cradle ?

“ Shall I bring you a cradle of lacquered wood,
with quaint patterns ? ”

She nodded her head and smiled wistfully—

She thrilled at the new life that was to be.

“ Yes, bring a beautiful cradle,” said she.

“ A cradle let it be.”

And so, to the Fair went he.

Fawn-tinted dusk turned to saffron light

While she counted the stars

Till her patience melted into a languid sleep.

Would it be an emerald, a ruby, a diamond---

Dreamt she. Or only a wooden cradle

For the life that stirred within her ?

“ We’ve no money,” her dream said, “ Only
enough for one meal a day.”

Back from the Fair came he, a lilting song
on his lips.

Alert, she asked : “ What have you brought
for me ? ”

“ This, my sweet,” said he, as he laid a
snow-white flower on her palm.

“ The emblem of my love for you

“ The symbol of yours for me.”

That we shall meet again :
You sipping champagne, smoking a Balkan
Sobranie
The jewelled holder between the petals of
your smiling, painted mouth.

“ Glad to have met you—but have we not
met before ? ”

Dreamily you'll say.

(Oh, that voice ! How you drawl and what
a fog-horn it sounds !)

“ I never forget a face ,

“ But I always forget the place

“ Where I first saw a face.

“ One meets so many. Do forgive me,

“ This unpardonable lack of memory.”

If my mosaic of you be really this

Then it were better that we never meet again

But you should go, as you have gone

Like a beautiful song

And walk towards the horizon.

It were better I should not see that gait so proud

Nor that face of moonlit grace

Nor that form with such beauty crowned

But you should go, as you have gone

Like a beautiful song

And walk towards the horizon.

When dawn burst forth like a scarlet flower,
And unfolded petal upon petal of its beauty,
And the earth was yet drenched with dew,
My heart sang with joy for you.
And I thought perchance you'd come to me,
But you came not.

THAT SATURDAY NOON

If you'd but come on that Saturday noon
How much we'd have talked : of the plans
I had made
Of how we'd spend our lives together, just
you and me,
Of my great, great love for you
If you had only come on that Saturday
noon, at three.

The tea things were spread out
And the hot afternoon sun fell athwart
The silver and old porcelain.
" She'll never come, she'll never come !
" Foolish one, is there none else for you ? "
The punctuated chimes of the old grandfather
clock repeated.
" She'll never come, O foolish heart
" To waste your warmth on such a one ! "

Deep-red bougainvillaeas were in a tall crystal
vase
For you said you loved nothing better than
flowers
And I wanted to greet you with them,
I longed for your footfall on my doorstep
I longed for the knock on the door

And you to come sailing in, mischief shining
in your eyes
The gurgling ripple of your laughter, like a
running stream,
The music of your voice, even if it were a word.
“ She’ll never come, O silly youth, she’ll
never come,”
Chimed the old grandfather clock with cruel
sarcasm
And heartless, mocking mirth.

The light waned, the glow on silver and
porcelain dimmed.
In the silence of my room I sat with patience
And the faith that you’d come,
Staring quietly at the blood-red bougainvillaeas
In the crystal vase.
At last a step and a knock on the door
And I ran wildly towards it, only to find your note.
“ Dear,” you said, “ You’ll understand
“ I can never meet you again. It is best thus
“ That our frail romance should end
“ Like music, faintly in the air. You’ll
understand.”
And then, suddenly, something within me
snapped.

Oh, if only you had come on that Saturday noon
How much we'd have talked, how much
we'd have planned.

The room was in darkness and stillness all
Save for the chime of the old grandfather clock :

“ I told you so ! She'll never come,

“ She'll never come ! O foolish, foolish heart

“ To waste your warmth on such a one ! ”

JUST A STREAK . . .

Just a streak, a flash as of lightning,
Just the faint scent of your breath
Just the swish of your chiffon
And then you were gone
And I was alone, all alone.

Just a flash, a streak as of lightning,
Just the aureole of your fragile face
Just the dim, musk perfume of the veni* on
your raven hair

And then you were gone
And I was alone, all alone.

Just a streak, a flash as of lightning,
Just a hurried glance, a secret word exchanged
Just puckish mischief in your eyes and
floating laughter

And then you were gone
And I was alone, all alone.

Just a flash, a streak as of lightning,
Just a silent word in my ear, the trace of
your lips on mine
Just a dream of song and pain, vivid ecstasy
And then you were gone
And I was alone, all alone.

* Flowers strung on a thread and worn in a semi-circular pattern on the knot of hair by Indian ladies.

TO MY MOTHER

(On her 76th birthday)

WHAT gift can I offer you on this your birthday ?
I stand with empty hands before you
But with love flowing in my heart
And unspoken wishes trembling on my lips.
Yet with great contentment and thanks to Him
That He has left you yet awhile with me.
We have grown old together, just you and I
We have faced many a stormy weather
We have sailed on calm seas
Like soft ripples of bluey glass.
You have been my only thought, my one
obsession,
My pillar of inspiration, my rock.
At every step taken
Any decision made
To you I have turned :
Shall it be yea or nay ?
And your smile of assent, your shake of dissent
Has been my sole guide.
Together we have mourned the loss

Of many an old friend who has gone, as must
we all.

Together we've wept, together we've smiled
and laughed

And cracked many an old joke.

Together we've made many a mistake and
repented

Together we've made many a friend and foe.

We have exchanged words of bitterness and strife

But for how long have we strayed apart ?

We have forgiven and forgotten

And again, been together.

Yes, we have watched hour merge into hour

And days and months and years lengthen

Till, sometimes, in our madness, we have

cursed that

God should throw no relief to us.

We have walked in sunlight and in shadow

With always the hope within us that tomorrow

May be different.

There is so much we have seen together

Pictures of life, joy and sorrow.

Every time that Death has crossed your shadow

And almost touched your lips with his icy kiss
I have prayed and prayed that you might be
spared me
Just awhile and the storm has passed away
And calm followed.
Yet, I know that soon you must go
Beyond my reach
And what will be left to me but a pitch black
night of desolation ?
Yet, I know that I must bear my grief in silence
And the Cross
Alone,
All alone.

March 1945.

THE WAYSIDE SHRINE

IN the heat of the noonday sun
The *patil* went to a wayside shrine,
A covered silver tray in hand.
In front of the god, carved in stone,
He squatted on the dusty ground
And with piety
He lit the *arti* before the image.
With lamp in hand, camphor and incense burning
He mumbled prayers, eyes half-closed, hand
pressed against hand :
“ Oh, God,” said he, “ See here,
“ The homage I have brought You.”
And then the *patil* uncovered the silver tray
Before the immutable eyes of stone.
There were mounds of rice, finest white
And dipped with layers of ghee
Scented with saffron. Vegetables pickled
with chillies,
Curds and creams of thick milk,
Slices of coconut, powdered with sugar,
A sumptuous meal for a *raja*.
“ Every day will I bring You this my homage
“ Every day I'll do the *puja*
“ Before You. Only hear my prayers
“ And grant them to me, Oh God.
“ My wishes are but few.

“ Listen to me, Oh God, grant me Your attention.

“ My wife is barren. Grant me sons.

"I have lands but I want more."

“ Can You not strike the land with a drought

“ So that the peasants mortgage their fields to me?”

“ Can You not send them to me, Oh God,

“ So that all they have be mine ?

“ I want more money and more land,

“ Increase my cattle by the score

“ And let them be fertile like the land

“ So that I may have more and more :

“ Cattle, land and wealth.

“ I want to own the entire village,

“The destinies of the peasants to be in the
palm of my hand.

“ Grant me my wish and I’ll bring You daily
a repast as a homage

“And daily it will be richer.

“ I’ll build a temple over Your shrine,

“ A temple of the finest stone, pedestal on
pedestal intricately carved,

“ And Your little image will hold sway over
this palace of peace and worship.

“ And in his heart kindle the love of the soil
 “ That, like me, he may toil
 “ And turn this patch of land
 “ Into something lasting, something of colour
 out of sand.”

Had the peasant but just looked up at the
image, carved in stone,

He would have seen

A shiver of a smile tremble on the lips of
the village god.

LULLABY

THROUGH spaces of faery faces
And through realms of silver clouds
I will settle your little fears, your wee doubts
My sweet, in a slumber of peace, with the
lyrics of the ages.

Rest your little head of gold on the pillow
And soon a whispering song of dream, like a billow
Will come to you, trembling as the morning
breeze,
Light as a feather, touching your lip with its
gossamer kiss.

Through spaces of lilting, laughing, jolly faces
And fleecy realms of gleaming clouds
In the land of nod, drown your fears and your
doubts,
My sweet, in a sleep of dreaming peace, with
the songs of the ages.

TO A SNOWFLAKE

Who chiselled thee, for so brief a while
kindled thee
But Him, Who pullulated this planet and me.
And yet—look at thy wemless beauty
Of clouds and filmy dreams.
From aerial domes, dancing, leaping so free
Crashing on earth, in an electric flash, an
immaculate butterfly on wings.
That a faery's tear, crystalline pearl-lush,
Gossamer orb of thinnest spider-thread should
be slush
Merging with the dust and the dirt of this Earth !
But 'tis ordained : from birth to death, be
dust unto dust
And this breath, this oriflamme, reaches the
zero of the Ego.

ANGELUS

THE sun is sinking in a dream of peace
The sky is fused with flaming fleece
Of orange and vermillion, opal and amethyst.
The land is drenched in a haze of mist.

Lights are glimmering here and there,
Monster eyes of gold with their immutable stare.
Serene mystery descends upon us all,
A dimness, a silence, a patchwork of shadows,
like a pall.

THE INITIAL

BETWEEN the purple of the flower and the
purple of the tower.
Between the purple of the ground and the
purple of the sound,
I seek for the Initial.

Between the flash and the flicker of a dream,
Between the seen and the unseen,
I sue for the Initial.

Between the word that is spoken and the
word that is mute,
Between the hymn and the prayer, the song
and the lute,
I search for the Initial.

MEMORY

ONE moment of pleasure and then—
A blank, forgetfulness, fleeting fancies.
One moment of love and then—
Remembrance, ecstasy, exquisite memory
Of tenderness, burning kisses, convulsive
embraces.

Silent speeches of love, the dynamic
Beating of a voluptuous heart.
For a caprice body yields to body,
And heart to heart and lip to lip . . .
Love lights her scorching flame
At the Altar of Life. Then
'Tis that Love is sanctified,
Made thrice divine ; Beauty then is
More beautiful and Passion more passionate.
Loving, they find solace and separation from
the Herd . . .

One moment of pleasure and then—
A blank, forgetfulness, fleeting fancies,
One moment of love and then—
Remembrance, ecstasy and exquisite memory.

ULTIMUM

THE white god you
The earth's russet dank the sky's lucent blue
In you.
Such honey milk flesh have I never seen
Satin smooth and hairless for a panther's
Strike and strength, still resilient, trident.
Those granite legs intertwined in mine
Octopus grip rough ropes tethered around me
And that rock of bones steel pylons
Draining my very breath in the passionate impact,
The faint scent of your mouth
The slit moon of crimson betel juice stained
Kajal eyes coruscating in the dark
You softly intoning the while of your mother
Your five brothers your *zamin* your *gaon*
From far Peshawar.
" We must die but once
" So we die with heads looking up
" Straight in the eyes of foes."
Drifting, crashing, battering on life's tidal waves
Who can forget you ? Always
The white god you
The earth's roscid bistre the sky's spangle blue
In you.

SHADOWS

SWIFT, shadowy shadows passing in the night,
Fleeting fast, ethereal, vague and panting
Into the black space. O'erhead a saffron sky
Sprayed with a shower of glinting stars.
A perfumed Indian garden, flower-laden—
The scent, sensuous, heavy, mysterious—
Innumerable Persian roses, tiger-lilies and
chumelies
Showery-white in the shades of the night. Mogras
Drooping their scented heads from jade-green
leaves,
And the jasmine perfume wafting on the winds.
Countless trees like phantom figures, silhouetted
Against the purple patches of the sky.
Far away the sea, inky-black and tempest-
tossed,
Silver-crested foam of the waves, surging
from rock to rock,
Singing the old, old lament . . .
Swift, shadowy shadows passing in the night,
fleeting fast.

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